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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a study in which a group of young African-American children responded to literature in a multiage primary classroom setting. This naturalistic study sought to: identify the modes of response preferred by the African-American children in this class, examine the content of those responses for evidence of links to ethnicity, and explore how responses were shaped by the ethnic identities of participants in the classroom--including the identities of the teacher and other students. First, the paper briefly reviews the literature on reader response theory as it has been applied to children. Second, it describes the modes of response observed among the children who participated in the study. Next, the paper looks at how the teacher validated and invalidated students' observable responses. Finally, it provides examples of these intersections and discusses the implications for classroom teachers committed to fostering high levels of aesthetic response in children. Contains 26 references. (NKA)

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The Intersections of Response and Ethnicity: Elementary School Students Respond to Multicultural Children's Literature

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The Intersections of Response and Ethnicity: Elementary School Students Respond to Multicultural Children's Literature

In today's paper, I will describe a study in which I examined how a group of young African American children responded to literature in an elementary classroom setting. In this naturalistic study, I sought to identify the modes of response preferred by the African American children in this class, examine the content of those responses for evidence of links to ethnicity, and explore how responses were shaped by the ethnic identities of participants in the classroom—including the identities of the teacher and other students.

I am organizing today's talk into four sections. First, I will briefly review the literature on reader response theory as it has been applied to children. Second, I will describe the modes of response I observed among the children who participated in this study. Next, I will look at how the teacher validated and invalidated students' observable responses. Finally, I will provide examples of these intersections and discuss the implications for classroom teachers committed to fostering high levels of aesthetic response in children.

Reader Response Theory and Children

Reader response is a phenomenon hard to "catch." As researchers of response have used this theory with readers, they have searched for observable evidence of how this invisible, internal transaction happens. Rosenblatt defined the transaction as "the synthesis of what the reader already knows and feels and desires with what the literary text offers—the patterned sensations, emotions, and ideas through which the author has sought to communicate his sense of life" (1968, pp. 272-273). Although Rosenblatt, when she proposed her transactional theory of response, was not necessarily exploring how "response" worked for the youngest readers, her work has been most influential in framing how those of us concerned with issues of literary response perceive response in children. It makes sense to us that responses should be shaped by each reader's background, including her cultural background. Because of Rosenblatt's efferent/aesthetic continuum, we have learned to differentiate such classroom staples as "comprehension questions" from open-ended questions or simple musings that allow children to explore the text critically. And even further down (or is it up? or along?) the continuum, she provides us with visions of readers stepping into stories for the sheer sake of enjoyment.

Although readers move along this continuum all the time when they read, often shifting stance for multiple purposes shaped over time and thus making this a difficult topic to research,

children's participation in this response process has fascinated me and become the focus of my work. The earliest research on response with young children was controlled—children were often pulled from their classes and interviewed about prepared passages. They were asked predetermined questions, and children were not unlike the "samples" we hear about in controlled studies where experimental populations are manipulated in some way (e.g., Applebee, 1978). More recent studies, such as Altieri's (1993), set up similar situations inside classrooms—for instance where the teacher is asked to read a story, make no comment about it, invite no discussion, and require students to respond in writing to prepared prompts.

Not everyone has been convinced that these artificial methods represent the only ways children's responses can be captured and analyzed. Hickman (1979) conducted one of the first naturalistic studies of children's responses to literature. In her research, she stayed in the classroom all day to observe responses when they spontaneously emerged in children's dialogue or behaviors—discussions, artistic response, writing, rereadings to name a few. Other researchers have followed her lead in evaluating how young children respond (Cox, 1997; Hepler, 1982; Kiefer, 1982; Lehr, 1985; Macphee, 1997; Sipe, 1997, 1998), the nature of literature discussions in small groups (Peterson & Eeds, 1990), and common response phenomena with upper grades students (Guice, 1995; Smith, 1993; 1997; Tyson, 1997).

My interest in response grows, ironically, from my commitment to issues of social equity in classrooms and my belief in educating children through high quality children's literature. In the classroom described in this paper, I noticed disproportionate numbers of minority students seated at the back of the classroom as a consequence of read-aloud disruptions, and I decided that an analysis of these students' responses might help to explain why they were excluded from the official reading setting. I found this curious and disturbing since I knew the teacher, was aware that she had taken advanced courses in children's literature, and recognized that she was sensitive to issues of race. Her silencing practices could not be purposeful.

Modes of Response and Content of Response

I would like to briefly review the context for this study. I observed in a multiage classroom (grades K-2) for a year—three days per week—and spent time collecting the words, behaviors, and documents of children in the classroom. In my analysis, I compared the responses of those children who self-identified as "African American" or "Black," and I then compared their responses to those of white classmates. I preface everything in this study by

noting that I am a white woman conducting research with African American children. Despite the fact that many of the children's families express no concern about this ("We don't see color," one family told me recently), I realize that my cultural background, gender, social class, and other social characteristics have shaped how I perceive these qualitative phenomena. I have achieved, at best, what Banks (1998) identifies as "external-insider" (Banks, 1998, p. 8) status in the eyes of the families of the children included in this research.

The responses I describe in this study are mediated in several ways (Nelms, 1998, personal communication). First, a reader's *real*, spontaneous response is internal. Therefore, we are made aware of this response only after it has been outwardly expressed in some way. The methods by which the response is outwardly demonstrated can be called the "modes of response" (Hickman, 1992, p.193) and should be differentiated from the *content* of the response. The essence of the expression (mode or content) can never be the same as the true response; it is merely an approximation. Second, many of these responses are not expressed immediately upon occurring but rather are expressed at a later time—for some children, only after successfully acquiring a speaking turn in the discussion. Finally, the expression of these internal responses is influenced by the social nature of the classroom (Desai, 1997). How children express them depends on the audience of peers and teacher. Therefore, as I describe children's "responses," I am necessarily describing my observations of the mediated exhibitions of readers' responses. I am also describing their responses to *hearing* a story rather than reading a story independently (Altieri, 1996).

Some would argue that the relative lack of aesthetic response in my transcripts—probably due to the teacher's primarily efferent stance throughout the study—precludes these from being considered "responses" at all. I will identify them as responses to read-aloud, and you can judge whether these "fit" your understandings of reader response or whether you view them as responses to the read-aloud as a social setting. This work grows out of a social response perspective (Beach, 1993); therefore, I examine the ways the social environment shapes response more heavily than I analyze the depth or content of responses.

After coding the data collected through observations, I identified five primary modes of response to read-aloud. The children in this class made responses observable by writing about stories, initiating new readings, bringing books to school for "share" time, moving, and

responding orally. Although I acknowledge all five modes, in this paper, I will limit my discussion to written responses, physical responses, and oral responses.

Written responses to literature generally surfaced during children's "journal" writing time. The teacher permitted children to select their own journal topics, so children often composed personal narratives or fictitious stories. Several of the students, however, wrote about stories they had read in class. A series of stories about Paddle-to-the-Sea (Holling, 1941/69) appeared in one peer groups' journals. After reading Lois Ehlert's (1994) Mole's Hill: A Woodland Tale, a number of Mole's Hill variations appeared in some of the journals. Since children shared their written stories with the class, other children then responded to peers' stories in ways similar to literature responses. Precious, an African American first-grader, composed several variations of Mole's Hill where she created characters based on her classmates. In Precious' responses, she used the written response to literature and group-shared writing in an attempt to gain access to the white girls' peer group who had been composing literature-related stories in their journals for some time. The characters she included in her stories were the girls (1) who'd written earlier Mole's Hill variations (thus she was imitating a response she thought they would find favorable) and (2) who appeared on Precious' list of children she wanted as friends—children she told me she was friends with but who I repeatedly observed ignore her or explicitly signal that she was not an in-group member. Therefore, responses were both reconstructions of the original stories they had heard and redefinitions of the function of written response. Written response surpassed interpretation of the text and was revised to become a social tool in the classroom.

I decided that my definition of ethnicity should be grounded in self-identification (if such identifications were made to me spontaneously by children) and parents' interviews with me about their families' beliefs, values, and sense of identity [rather than children's "official" ethnicities on school documents (e.g., Altieri, 1997, personal communication)]. Within the group of children who self-identified African American, I defined at least two groups with different ethnic identities. (I am aware that making group distinctions is a slippery enterprise and acknowledge the fluidity of these groupings.) I make this observation because I defined one group as the "marginalized" African American children. These children did not fit easily into the culture of school since very little of the school culture explicitly matched the norms of home,

such as discourse patterns and "common knowledge" (Edwards & Mercer, 1987) about behavior expectations.

In their observations of children's responses to literature, other researchers have observed that young children's responses are sometimes physical. In this study, the marginalized group of students exhibited the most movements in response to stories. Members of the marginalized group engaged in visible physical movement approximately four times more often than all their classmates combined. These movements were both directly related to the reading or were related more specifically to the read-aloud as a social setting. I won't explore the responses to the setting (e.g., hair braiding, hugging, playing with markers) since it is impossible to identify the degree to which these could have been linked to reader response. However, I will identify the reading-related movement responses I observed among African American students most often.

The movements directly related to story included what I've named "scooting"(a child's movement toward the reader while attempting to see the illustrations of a picture book), pointing at the illustrations in a book, taking a book from the hands of a reader, waving hands in an attempt to acquire a speaking turn to comment on the book, and hopping up in enthusiasm when momentarily excited by the content of the story. In contrast, the movements of the white students were considerably less frequent and were usually unrelated to the story.

Everything I observed about the children's physical responses to literature was consistent with what other researchers of older African American students have observed and documented. Other researchers have explained how older students engage in "body punctuation" or other kinds of movement to demonstrate responses (Smith, 1993, 1997; Tyson, 1997). However, the responses of these children were even more physical than I had expected. When I compared these movements to the children's behaviors at other times of day, I found that children's tendencies to respond physically also happened as they laughed and played in the lunch line, when they used words and gestures to convey a point at recess, and how they communicated their feelings of excitement or engagement during worktime.

A final response mode I identified was the oral response. Children's oral responses to read-alouds included a large number of responses to teachers' efferent questions, the asking of questions as they clarified the text, connections between personal lives and the story, analytic comments, and stepping into stories. Most of the children in the marginalized group tended to "call out" these responses; I borrow this term from the classroom teacher who labeled responses

delivered before successful acquisition of a speaking turn a "called out" response. I did not observe any differences in the types of responses that were likely to be called out.

Teacher Validation and Invalidation

This discussion of oral responses leads me easily into the discussion of how responses were validated or invalidated in the classroom. Validating behaviors included the teacher repeating the child's comment in an affirmative tone, making affirmative remarks (e.g., "very good," or "thank you"), or making a written record of the child's response on chart paper. Validations reinforced the comment in some way and let the community of readers know that it was valued.

When responses were invalidated, the teacher used several strategies to teach the child how to participate in the read-aloud according to the understood expectations. One strategy for invalidating a child's response was to read on as if the comment had not been made. Using this strategy, the teacher hoped that the child would reconsider how she was acquiring a speaking turn and use one of the understood means for acquiring a turn—for instance, hand-raising. Another strategy I observed was the teacher's use of selective hearing, ignoring the comment of a child who had "called out" and instead calling on a child who was raising his or her hand. I also observed the teacher repeat the directions for acquiring a validated speaking turn during read-aloud. Occasionally, a child would be asked to move to the back of the group or would have her name added to a disciplinary list as a consequence of violating read-aloud time expectations.

The norms of participation—as identified to me by the children of the class—included sitting during read-aloud, looking directly at the teacher, and waiting for permission to speak. I listened to one child who religiously followed the rules of read-aloud. She memorized the requirements and proudly rattled them off. "Look, stay still, and listen." Little Sam explained, "You're the mouth, and we're the ears."

It is easy to see the potential for dissonance in this classroom. The preferred modes of response for the marginalized group of African American children were calling out and movement—by far the largest categories of response in my analysis. However, the teacher's understanding of read-aloud culture held that children would quietly sit still and raise their hands before speaking, so we have an almost textbook case of cultural miscommunication. Furthermore, this was the expectation of all the other children in the classroom, including the

white children and the other African American children. I would like to explore these intersections in more depth.

Intersections

* The teacher is reading in Paddle-to-the-Sea. Just before identifying the biggest lake, she pauses and asks, "What's the biggest lake?" Latresa yells, "Lake Erie!" The teacher replies, "No, raise your hand." (It's hard for Latresa to tell if her response mode is wrong or if the content is wrong—in this case, it's both.)

* During another reading David calls out, "I can't see. I want to see the kitten--on the other page!"

* While the teacher reads, Precious is crawling on the floor and shaking—making a little chanting sound—almost like a cheer. She stops to see the picture—gets up higher on her feet and looks at the book.

* After reading Rosales' (1996) 'Twas the Night B'fore Christmas (a story with an African American Santa Claus) the grandmother-reader pauses to ask the children questions. She asks a few efferent questions (e.g., "Which reindeer is missing?"), and all of her volunteers—20 to 30 hands up in the air—are White children. Next, she approaches the issue of Santa's race.

Grandmother: What's the difference in this Santa Claus and the one we're used to seeing?
Child: The color of the skin.
Grandmother: How many of you believe in Santa?
Chris: (interrupts) Is he REALLY black or white? I want him to be white.
Several other children say they want him to be white. (I sense a bit of panic.)

* Teacher holds up the book Red Leaf, Yellow Leaf. Pat (WF) has her hand up and when prompted by the teacher to do so, reads aloud the title. "Red Leaf, Yellow Leaf." David sits up close to the teacher. He leans up into her lap. "Sit down, David." At the same time, Precious gets up and is walking around the message board to the other side of the teacher. As the teacher begins reading, Precious reaches up and points to the illustrations. A few moments later, during a pause in the discussion, Precious points to the page again. "What's this?" she asks—twice. The teacher responds, "Precious you're still shouting out," and reads on in the book. A moment later, Precious is reaching out and pointing again. Exasperated, she asks, "What do that thing do?" The teacher looks at her. "Precious." I recognize this as the look my mother once gave me when she had "reached the end of her rope." Precious is effectively silenced. A few moments later, she raises her hand.

Teacher: Precious, did you have a question or a comment since your hand was up?
Precious says nothing.

Most of the transcripts I collected during the year I spent in this classroom contain examples of an IRE (initiation, response, evaluation) sequence, a traditional participant structure

unique to classrooms (Cazden, 1988; Edwards & Mercer, 1987). In this structure, the power to control the discourse resides with the teacher. The children in the marginalized group, however, pushed the limits of this participant structure daily. Precious, David, Latresa, and Shade often called out their responses immediately and were unlikely to offer "comments and questions" during the permissible time at the end of the story. The teacher had a host of reasons for using this sequence, and I'll soon be making a presentation on what I call professional constraints on response. I recognized this dissonance as a function of the time the teacher could allocate to read-aloud. Like other classroom teachers in our country, her time for read-aloud increasingly was devoted to phonics, skills activities and less and less often to read-aloud (Short, 1999). Therefore, with very little time for literature, she often required students to hold their comments until the end of the story. When abruptly dismissed for lunch, gym, or recess, the discussion promptly ended. Furthermore, many students are unable to hold responses until the end of a story; this style does not fit with their discourse patterns. Environments in which children can talk through their responses *during* the reading foster deeper levels of response and *more* observable response in children (Guice, 1995; Sipe, 1997).

I knew the marginalized group of children provided intertextual, transparent, personal, performative, and analytic responses (Sipe, 1998) because they did so with me in a small-group read aloud setting (Copenhaver, 1998). Therefore, on a few occasions, I asked the teacher to adjust her participant structure. I requested that she pause after reading each page of the book to allow children's spontaneous responses. Using this method, she read aloud three books with African American protagonists, Zora Hurston and the Chinaberry Tree (Miller, 1994), Kinda Blue (Grifalconi, 1993), and The Story of Ruby Bridges (Coles, 1995). The proportion of speaking turns the marginalized group acquired during these read-alouds doubled relative to the average number of speaking turns during previous read-alouds. Furthermore, the content of discussion grew beyond the efferent question and answer format used in earlier read-alouds.

During the reading of The Story of Ruby Bridges, Shawn commented twice, unprompted, "It's a true story!" Billy stepped into the story, chanting the character's name, "Ruby, Ruby, Ruby," over and over while seeing the illustration of Ruby braving the vicious crowd.

I was amazed at the ways in which the White students talked about race. For instance, in the discussion of Ruby Bridges, Lauren (WF) suggested that in her school the principal would never stand for such discrimination. "There are a lot of people--here," she began. "Our principal

wouldn't do that. Black people are people, too." A few moments later, Mary and Chris (WF, WM) were trying to turn the discussion into one about slavery and the underground railroad--a topic their class had studied the prior year. The idea of modern racial tensions escaped them, even though they were living it in their own classroom.

Precious acknowledged race explicitly as she responded to literature. While the White students in her class appeared color-blind in their responses to multicultural literature, Precious' oral responses identified her as an African American girl sensitive to issues of race. As her teacher began to read The Story of Ruby Bridges (Coles, 1995), for instance, the teacher mentioned to the class that it was published in 1995—the same year, she thought, as the story Boundless Grace (Hoffman, 1995) had been published. Precious spoke out in affirmation, "Yeah," attesting to her feelings of familiarity with both books about African American girls. While her White classmates spoke in response to the story, connecting it back to "the slave days" and approached the story from a safely removed position, Precious revealed her identification with the African American characters in both the slavery threads and the story threads.

> [The teacher has been trying to bring the conversation back from slavery to focus on Ruby's story.]
> Teacher: But why? If you were a slaveowner, you wouldn't allow your slaves to read. There was a reason? (She uses inflection of question.) Precious? (Getting Precious' attention; Precious wasn't looking up.)
> Precious: They just wanted slaves to be dumb. [Note the switch from the teacher's "you" to Precious' use of "they."]
> Teacher: Say that again. What do you think?
> Precious: They didn't want them to go to school.
> Teacher: Dumb is kind of the thing that happens if you don't read. On the other side of the coin, if you read, what good things will happen to you?
> Precious: You'll be smarter, and you can read, and you won't be dumb.
> Teacher: And then you can do whatever you want to do, isn't that right?
> (Three African American children raise their hands.)
> Teacher: And some people at this time (i.e. the time in which Ruby Bridges was set) still felt that way. They did not want—(pause)—they were worried.
> Precious: I wouldn't want to be dumb. (43/p.13)

Precious also showed her identification with Booker T. Washington after her intern read-aloud More Than Anything Else (Bradby, 1995). After the reading, the teacher asked, "I want to know how you are like Booker." Immediately Precious responded, "He wanted a book to read, and I do, too." Only one other child responded to that question—Travis, another African American student who stated, "I like to read."

On several occasions, Precious seemed to openly acknowledge the issue of race despite her classmates' reluctance to initiate talk on the subject. When her teacher read The Faithful Friend (San Souci, 1995), it was Precious who interrupted the teacher's reading.

Teacher: (Reading from the text) "Two boys--"
Precious: (Hops up) Two boys! It's a white boy and a black boy!
Teacher: You think that's what it's going to be?
[The reading continues, but the issue of race is never again discussed.]

Implications/Reflections

I completed this study a year and a half ago, and I still think of Precious daily. If one adopts a social interactionist perspective on social development, how Precious begins to think of herself—as a desirable classmate, as a reader—will depend on the "mirror" others put before her (see Hewitt, 1994). If her responses defy class expectations for "Response," (capital R intended) she risks being ostracized by her peers. In fact, Precious was kept from full participation in the unofficial peer groups of the classroom. The girls for whom she composed the Mole's Hill stories (and other stories) never reciprocated her efforts. In fact, they actively sought to define themselves as different from her and would not even sit near her. I have a daughter Precious' age. What if her response modes identified her as "different?" Worse, what if she were unofficially labeled "bad" or "undesirable" by her classmates because our home culture differed from that of school? Precious *did* engage in all the kinds of response teachers want from children—analytic, personal, intertextual, transparent—but found little opportunity to have these responses "heard" in the classroom. Children of all "marginalized" groups can be helped to become full, validated participants in the classroom setting. First, we must learn the logic underlying their responses and behaviors. Then, the responsibility of teachers is to find ways to make the culture of school honor, rather than silence, those differences.

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